

Best Practices implemented by Agro tourism Farms in the Era of pandemic to retain the customers

Mr. Nilesh Upadhye¹

Research Scholar, Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth, Pune

Mr. Dhiraj Shingare²

Asst. Professor, TMV Department of Hotel management

Abstract

Tourism industry suffered a heavy loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to lockdown and restrictions in place, it was very difficult to visit different places. Agri tourism is an important way of diversifying rural areas. It is the best way to make farmers financially sound. It creates the additional income source for the farmers. In the unlock phase it is extremely important to retain the old customers. The aim of the paper is to know the different practices implemented by Agri tourism farms to retain their customer.

Key Words – Customer retention, COVID-19, Agro tourism

INTRODUCTION

These days the definition of Tourism is completely changed due to the innovation and new ideas. There are so many new options available to fulfill the demand from industry. Agro-Tourism is one of the most popular forms of tourism for urbanites. It really gives them a different experience and knowledge about so many things that they never see in their daily hustle bustle. Agro-Tourism is now a best model for rural part of the nation to earn not only bread and butter but also in creating an employment opportunity for skilled and unskilled labor of rural as well as urban area. Now days, there are many firms established under agro tourism concept around Pune city such as Vidisha Agro

Tourism, Megh Malhar, Mango forest etc. The state of Maharashtra has played vital role in promoting and developing the Agro-Tourism across the nation.

The first case of unknown virus was found in Wuhan, China and then later on after the research it was declared as new strain of SARS virus COVID-19. Due to the fact, that the COVID-19 is highly infectious and contagious and it can lead to mortality. Government of India declared the complete lockdown in March 2020 and no citizen was allowed to move freely anywhere in the country. It was very mammoth challenge for government to handle the situation as many of the leading democracies suffered badly even after having world's best medical facilities. The pandemic has had strong impact almost on all industries such as manufacturing, service, medical, hospitality and tourism was the one of the most impacted industry.

The compulsion of lockdown such as closing borders of cities, districts and states meant that citizens had to stay at home as it was only allowed to come out for essential services such as grocery, medical services etc. Therefore due to the strict guidelines tourism industry had no business at all and also because of the long lockdown out stationed staff was unavailable. To kick start the tourism industry government has to give some booster and without governments initiative it is very difficult gain the momentum for agro-tourism. As per the *Dope News (Oct 2020)* confirmed that government has taken following efforts and made some crucial changes in the policy such as

- Introduce more tourist spot- it will be a boon to many farmers to sale their product.
- Data bank with the name “Maharashtra Tourism- Something for everyone” which will have all vital information about agriculture tourism, pilgrim centers etc. to increase the revenue of tourism.
- Government had issued SOP for smooth and safe opening of tourism centers.
- Formulation of new policies and implementation of new large scale projects.

The focus of these policies is to give a tonic to rural economy and to get back it on the track.

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Agriculture has 85% share in Indian economy and from this contribution we can guess that how important is Agriculture sector. As discussed Maharashtra state has a significant role in developing Agro-tourism across India. But, today it is very difficult for agro-tourism centers to sustain in the market because of the sudden lockdown and pandemic situation. Therefore it is now a much needed step to be taken to retain the business and clients by entrepreneurs. This article will elaborate the

efforts taken by tourism centers and also study will help to understand the concept of Agro-tourism. Hence it is a golden opportunity for the farmers to sell their products and earn good amount. Maharashtra is a state where urban population is growing at rapid speed and their world is becoming very restricted and limited in the closed door system. Therefore, there is a huge scope for farmers to utilize the available resources and serve something innovative and unique.

Concept of Agro-Tourism:

The concept of Agro tourism is very easy to understand. The urban tourists go to the farm and stay like farmer and contribute in farming activity. They experience tractor and bullock cart ride, farming, playing traditional games like kite flying etc. They can also enjoy folk songs and dance of same region. At the end, they can also purchase fresh farm produce and at the same time farmers will maintain the hygiene and sanitation of those cottages and provides necessary facilities to the visitors.

As per Mr PandurangTavare (ATDC, Pune) “Agro-Tourism is that Agri-Business activity, when a native farmers or person of the area offers tours to their agriculture farm to allow a person to view them growing, harvesting, and processing locally grown foods, such as coconuts, pineapple, sugar cane, corn or any agriculture produce the person would not encounter in their city or home country. Often the famers would provide a home-stay opportunity and education”.

Agro-Tourism and Eco-Tourism goes hand in hand. Tour operator companies provide Eco-Tourism and on the other hand farmer serves the agriculture based activities, stay, traditional food to the tourists. These activities bring tourists close to the nature and rural life where they can be part of this life and feel the pleasure of tour. The location of the Agro-Tourism center is very crucial to attract tourists also it must be easily accessible from all possible ways such as Road, Rail ways etc. Normally, tourists prefer to visit such locations where they can have more choices to visit thereforeif developed tourist destinations are nearby then it would be very easy to develop the tourism center.

LITERATURE REVIEW –

According to paper titled Agritourism in the Era of the Coronavirus (COVID-19): A Rapid Assessment from Poland by Monika MałgorzataWojcieszak-Zbierska, Anna Jęczynek, Jan Zawadkaand JarosławUglis(2020)published in Agriculture 2020,after the pandemic visiting Agritourism farm is the better idea to overcome from stress. It is necessary because during the pandemic many people lost their jobs and many of them didn't get the paid full salary. People will

definitely visit the Agritourism farm if they are taking necessary precautionary measure in terms of hygiene and sanitation.

According to paperCovid-19 as an opportunity for more sustainable tourism – A realistic expectation?By Lena Heinze, Marina Candi (2020), tourism industry suffered a lot due the pandemic due to its low demand. Agritourism farm are implementing the new multi-method approach to sustain in the market. There is tremendous change in the work culture of every organization knowing it is the responsibility of individual Agritourism farms to cope up with the current change. Every organisation needs plan and build new strategies and action for the resilient and sustainable business.

OBJECTIVE

1. To study the concept of Agritourism
2. To study the practices implemented by Agritourism farm to retain the customer post pandemic.

Practices implemented by farmers to retain the customer

❖ Developing the communication strategy –

Farmers have already done a tremendous job at adopting the challenges of COVID-19 on their farms as well as at their direct marketing places. To be successful, robust communication plans needs to be implemented that provides customers and employees with clear understanding of standard operating procedure and protocols to be followed while visiting to the farm. With help of previous collected customer database farmers are communicating with customers and providing details about their agro farm. It is very useful strategy to reach to the customers door step and invite to avail the facilities at the agro farm. Use of multiple ways of promoting the own brand like website, phone message, farm signage, newsletters, TV advertisement and radio are very useful and successful medium through which farmers directly connect with the customers and community. This pandemic made farmer to introduce, implement and accept the new practices at their farm to sustain in the market.

❖ Estimating Customers capacity –

This year, you need to maintain social distancing, limit the number of customers on the farm at any given time. As farmers are limiting their advertising activity to focus on core repeat customers and ensuring that they have safe and enjoyable visit. Each farmer is aware about social distancing norms, as they follow the same at their particular place by inviting the limited customers at one point of time. Farmers are more focusing on the field activity like corn maze, U-pick field, gardening, tree plantation and many more. Also farmers have many limitations which they need to follow at car parking, restroom, and indoor areas. Depending upon the capacity agro farm customers should be divided into different slots through this it is easier to maintain the social distancing norms. If customers are in the group then maintain the distance of 6 feet in every group.

Farmers are creating the online booking system for the customers. This helps the farmer to control the crowd. Applying the individual package combination of all the activity so that customer doesn't need to go to particular place to collect the coupon for the activity and all the rates are all inclusive which help the operator or cashier to handle minimum cash. Use of electronic payment (e.g. Google Pay, Paytm and other online portals to do the payment) is safest way to receive the payment. Increasing strength of the trained staff that can help to handle the customer and understand the hygiene and sanitation practices. Recruiting the hospitality staff to monitor and control the traffic flow on the farm to limit the customer entry at the peak time.

❖ Display signs reinforcing new practices

Signs at the farm entry:

- Customers who have symptoms or have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 should not enter the farm.
- Customer who have travelled from the outer district or state and has travel restriction of should not enter into the farm.
- If the Customers displaying COVID-19 symptoms will be asked to leave.
- Customers must wear cloth face coverings; if they refuse, they will be asked to leave.
- Mark walkways with crowd control barriers.
- Mark waiting areas with 6 foot distancing

❖ Train your employees

Farm managers are taking lot of initiatives to train their employees. Managers are convincing their staff about the importance of the continuous use of face mask and the shield so that the employee can demonstrate the customers and adhere the 6 foot physical distancing norm and use of face mask. Prior to opening of farm for the customer, manager are regularly scheduling the training classes to understand both specific plan of action and relevant rules and regulation set by the state government. There are certain points which are covered in the training;

- Properly use, store, and wash their cloth face covering.
- Hands should be washed before putting mask on and after removal.
- Avoid touching portions of mask regularly; handle by ear bands only.
- Wash and sanitize hands properly as per recommended for general food safety.
- Wash hands regularly upon arriving at work, before and after eating, after using the restroom.
- Use disposable gloves properly very often.
- Observe 6-foot physical distance with other employees and customers.
- Arrive each day wearing clean clothes.
- Wash work clothes separately from other clothes.

❖ Design outdoor activities and entertainment options-

Entertainment is the key to the successful agro tourism operation. Considering the risk of COVID-19 customers must avoid gathering at one place. Focusing on outdoor activities

Scheduled Farm Demonstrations –

- Farmers are demonstrating the customers about how to do the plowing, weeding, removing meadow. How to utilise the drip irrigation and other demonstration being planned by the agro farm owner.
- Cow, goat milk extraction activity.
- Grazing
- Feeding cattle

Farm Tours and Rides

- Camel ride, bullock cart ride, horse ride can help to maintain the physical distancing.

❖ **Providing additional hand washing and restroom facility**

Restrooms is the place which is been used by each and every customer. To keep this thing in mind multiple restrooms should be provided by the particular destination to maintain the social distancing norm to keep the customer safe. Also hand sanitiser dispenser being provided at short interval at particular locations.

❖ **Increase the frequency of cleaning**

Since, customers are coming from different locations, it is important to keep in mind high traffic or frequent touching areas like doors, light switches, tables, chairs, cart and basket handles, credit card machines, handrails, and bathrooms cleaning frequency is increased. Restroom and common areas are being cleaned on certain intervals.

❖ **Stay up-to-date on COVID-19**

- Agro farmer owners are updating themselves with new guidelines. Preparing and modifying the new protocols for the employee as well as customers.
- Assigning vulnerable employees to duties like managing inventory, administrative work from home that can minimise the contact with the customers.
- It is been informed to every employees that if the employees are having COVID symptoms they must report immediately to their supervisor.

By implementing these proactive steps agro farm owner are protecting their team and customer as well. They are successful in creating positive environment among the employee and customers. This leads to the sustenance of the agro farm and successful customer retention.

Conclusion

Agro tourism is an alternative source of income for the farmers and also an added employment opportunity through tourism. The global pandemic has impacted drastically on agro tourism. Due to the sudden lockdown agro tourism faced a major setback and led to many losses in terms of business during the peak period of summer vacations. It is the time when most of the tourist prefer short trips to agro farms with family and spend a quality time with nature. Customer retention was a key during this crises situation. With government's new initiative of 'missions begin', domestic tourism and vocal for local were the most preferred options for sustainability.

Gaining customer trust was done through following strong SOP's given by ministry of health at the destination giving hygiene and sanitization utmost importance. Methods such as package designing, positive social media marketing, guest interviews, videos on new normal, guest engagement through agriculture and farming activities giving guest an unique experience has helped the agro-tourism in sustaining their business. Though the period of pandemic has been very tough for all, there seems to be a new hope of 'new normal' while adapting new policies, procedures, practices and being flexible and positive towards the future of the business.

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